

A black and white portrait of a man, Harry Boland, wearing a dark suit, white shirt, and patterned tie. He is looking slightly to the left of the camera with a neutral expression. The background is dark and out of focus.

HARRY  
BOLAND

*A Biography*

JIM MAHER

## BORN INTO PATRIOTISM

Irish freedom meant everything to Harry Boland. This yearning had been handed down to him from past generations on both sides of his family.<sup>1</sup> Harry's father, Jim, met Catherine Woods in Manchester while he was working at the laying of the Manchester Tramways. Catherine was born in Manchester in 1861, of Co. Louth lineage. Her father, Philip Woods, came from the Carlingford area. Her great-grandfather, James Woods, a blacksmith from Cooley, was whipped through the streets of Carlingford, tied to the back of a cart, for making pikes for the rebels in the 1798 Rising.<sup>2</sup>

Jim Boland could trace his roots to the townland of Cams in the parish of Fuerty, Co. Roscommon, but he was born in Manchester in 1857. His father, Patrick, was very active in the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB), a secret, oath-bound organisation dedicated to establishing an independent Ireland.<sup>3</sup>

Jim arrived in Dublin for the first time in 1880 as a foreman with the Liverpool firm Worthingtons, which had secured the contract for paving Dublin's streets. Shortly afterwards, the city council decided to do the work by direct labour and Jim was given the job of overseer, with a weekly wage of £2. On 21 October 1882 he married Catherine in St Kevin's Church, Harrington Street.

While in Dublin, Jim became a member of the Supreme Council of the IRB. He was also the centre (secret leader) for the province of Leinster and at one time chairman of the Dublin

Directory of the IRB.<sup>4</sup> Within the Directory, Jim was very friendly with Denis Seery. Denis was a first cousin of Thomas Tynan, who was a strong Land Leaguer and also a member of the IRB organisation in Leinster. Denis often visited the Tynan home – Peafield House in Mountrath – and he introduced Jim to the family.

In September 1882 an attempt was made to evict the Tynans, as they were unable to pay the increased rent of £4 an acre. The Tynan family's imposing twelve-roomed, two-storey house stood on 175 acres of good Queen's County (Laois) land. Almost 400 people from the local community assembled to prevent the bailiffs from seizing the cattle and horses on the farm or occupying the dwelling house. The bailiffs and police eventually withdrew, though they were expected to return, so Jim and Denis decided to try to frighten them. Jim constructed a bomb, which he gave to Denis, who then planted it near the land agent's house in Cool, not far from Maryborough. The bomb went off at 2 a.m. on Christmas morning 1882. It did considerable damage to property, but no one was injured. However, the landlord became worried and, as a result, came to an arrangement with Thomas Tynan, whose rent was reduced from £4 per acre to £1 per acre. The Tynans of Peafield House would always remember the help Jim gave them.<sup>5</sup>

Heavy police surveillance of Jim soon forced him to leave Ireland for America with his young bride. For the next two-and-a-half years he organised Fenian activities in many parts of the USA. A younger brother of his, John P., was already a Fenian organiser there, having been sent out by the IRB to keep in touch with the Republican Clan-na-Gael movement in New York.<sup>6</sup>

Jim and Catherine's first child, Nellie, was born in America in 1884. They left in 1885 and initially went to Manchester, where their first son, Gerry, was born in May 1885. When Gerry was

just six months old, Jim and his family moved back to Dublin, taking up residence at 6 Dalymount Terrace, Phibsborough. Jim resumed his job with the paving department of Dublin Corporation.<sup>7</sup> The couple's second son, Harry, was born on 27 April 1887, followed by Kathleen in 1890 and Edmund (Ned), the youngest, in 1893.<sup>8</sup>

In the years after he returned to Dublin, Jim became a member of the National Club in Rutland Square and he enthusiastically supported Charles Stewart Parnell, the Irish nationalist politician. The police continued to keep Jim under surveillance because he was still a member of the IRB, and a detective could be seen constantly outside the Boland home.<sup>9</sup>

Jim was also very active in Dublin GAA circles. In 1892 he was chairman of the Dublin County Board of the GAA and the following year he represented Co. Dublin on the Central Council of the infant organisation.<sup>10</sup> Jim played with his young sons in the open green spaces near his own home and he gave Harry his first lessons in wielding the camán. The family lived near Dalymount Park, headquarters of Bohemians soccer club, where the playing pitch was grazed by sheep. Harry and Gerry spent many afternoons riding the sheep around the playing field just for the thrill of being thrown off.<sup>11</sup>

After the death of Parnell, Jim opposed Tim Healy and his supporters in their attempt to control the Irish Parliamentary Party. The Healyites took possession of the Dublin premises of the Parnellite newspaper, *United Ireland*. A group of Parnellites decided to regain control of the newspaper offices and, as part of this plan, Jim recruited a small number of IRB men to invade the premises. The two opposing sides, Parnellites and Healyites, became involved in a fracas and Jim received a heavy blow to the top of his head with the leg of a chair. At first it did not seem to be a serious injury, but a cyst developed inside his skull

and exerted pressure on his brain. As time went on, his health gradually deteriorated, and he experienced severe headaches and then some loss of memory.<sup>12</sup> He had to go on extended sick leave from his Dublin Corporation job and underwent unsuccessful brain surgery at the Mater Hospital. When Catherine saw that Jim was sinking rapidly, she sent for a priest from Phibsborough church to give her husband the last rites. The priest approached Jim in a stony fashion and said, 'I believe Mr Boland, you are a great Fenian.'

Even though very ill, Jim sensed the cool greeting. 'Not a great Fenian,' he answered, 'but a Fenian all the time.'

'Of course, if you refuse to desist from your Fenian activities, I can't give you absolution,' admonished the priest.

Jim looked at him, unmoved, and said, 'I won't die with a lie on my mouth, so I must go to God as I am.'<sup>13</sup>

Catherine then sent for Fr Headley, a sympathetic Dominican priest, who gave Jim the last anointing. Harry's father died in the Mater Hospital on 11 March 1895, having spent five months as a patient there.<sup>14</sup> Harry was just eight years old when he lost the father he loved and admired very much.

Jim had been out of work for a considerable time before his death and the family was now left without a breadwinner, but his nationalist friends rallied around the widow and family. The Tynans of Peafield House did not forget the help Jim had given when they were in danger of eviction, and Thomas took a prominent position on the fundraising committee. Others on the committee included Fred Allen, then manager of the *Irish Independent*, William Field, MP, and Pat O'Brien, MP and former IRB friend of Jim's. The final report of the Boland Family Fund stated: 'A meeting of the committee and subscribers of the Boland Family Fund was held last night in the National Club. A balance sheet was submitted which showed that the total

income reached the handsome sum of £293. After deducting the purchase of a first-class going business in the tobacconist trade at 28 Wexford Street it leaves a handsome balance in the bank to the credit of Mrs Boland and the family.' With Catherine setting up in business there, the family went to live in Wexford Street.<sup>15</sup> The building consisted of a shop and a house with four rooms. Catherine was in her mid-thirties when she took on the new business.

Further help for the family came from the Dublin County Board of the GAA, who held a special tournament at Clonturk Park on 9 June 1895 in which football and hurling teams from places as far apart as Thurles and Cavan took part. The Boland family received another good sum of money from the tournament.<sup>16</sup>

The Boland Family Fund kept the family going for up to five years after the death of their father. Nellie, the eldest girl, stayed at home helping with the family business, but she was not a healthy child. Gerry and Harry were at the point where their second-level schooling had to be considered. In those days only a minority of families could afford to give their children second-level education and the shop was not turning over enough of a profit for Catherine to pay for their further education because she was not a good businesswoman and had too soft a heart. Gerry later said that 'she could not refuse the poor, whether they had money or not'.<sup>17</sup>

It was Pat O'Brien who arranged for the Irish Christian Brothers to admit Gerry to the new O'Brien Institute in Marino, Dublin, which was a semi-orphanage for children with only one parent alive. Harry was sent to school in Synge Street CBS, but soon clashed with one particular Christian Brother and refused to return.<sup>18</sup> Catherine had many problems at the time and was becoming increasingly worried about the health of her daughter

Nellie, who had contracted TB and was getting weaker, so Denis Seery asked Thomas Tynan and his wife, Anna, to help out with Harry's schooling. They decided to bring Harry to their home and to look after his second-level education. In nearby Castletown, the De La Salle Brothers had a novitiate boarding college reserved for novices of the order. Thomas got in touch with the Brothers and asked them to make an exception and take Harry in as a boarder. They agreed to admit Harry for a very nominal sum of money and he spent three years in the novitiate. During the school holidays after each term, he stayed in Peafield House, where the environment was very nationalistic.<sup>19</sup>

There were great facilities for study in Castletown and a great spirit of learning. Harry excelled in the sporting arena in the college. Hurling was the dominant game in the junior school and every student was expected to try his skill at this sport. Harry brought with him the hurling skills he had learned from his father. Every student also had to learn to swim in the River Nore, which flowed through the college lands.<sup>20</sup>

While Harry spent his holidays in Peafield House he was reared as a young country farmer. He did the same work on the farm as the three Tynan brothers: John, Michael and Thomas Jnr. Thomas was the same age as Harry and they played together every day. Thomas always said that Harry would never back down from anything: 'It was not his nature even to back away from a bigger lad if a row started. Even as a schoolboy he was a bit of a "divil".'<sup>21</sup> The eldest Tynan brother, John, who was then twenty-five years of age, was eleven years older than Harry. He kept a watchful 'big brother' eye on him and they became inseparable friends.<sup>22</sup> Harry's stay in Peafield House gave him an understanding of life in rural Ireland and he carried many of his Castletown and Peafield House educational, sporting and farming experiences with him throughout his life.

**HARRY BOLAND WAS AN ARDENT AND REVERED REPUBLICAN. A LOYAL CONFIDANT TO ÉAMON DE VALERA. A CLOSE FRIEND AND, LATER, LOVE RIVAL TO MICHAEL COLLINS FOR THE HEART OF KITTY KIERNAN.**

This is the definitive account of his life, a detailed and dramatic narration of the part he played in Ireland's struggle towards independence and its tragic conclusion. It covers Boland's role in the 1916 Rising, his involvement with Sinn Féin, his work in the 1918 general election, and his time in the USA during the War of Independence, where he came to national prominence while campaigning for American support for Irish freedom. The book also details Boland's subsequent return to a broken homeland on the cusp of Civil War and his ill-fated attempts to stop the worst from happening. In the end, an Irish Republic meant everything to Harry Boland, and he was prepared to do whatever it took to try to make it a reality, no matter the cost to him.



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